

Travis N. Ridout & Michael M. Franz, **The Persuasive Power of Campaign Advertising**, 2011, Temple University Press, 200 pp., \$23.95 (paperback), \$13.17 (Kindle).

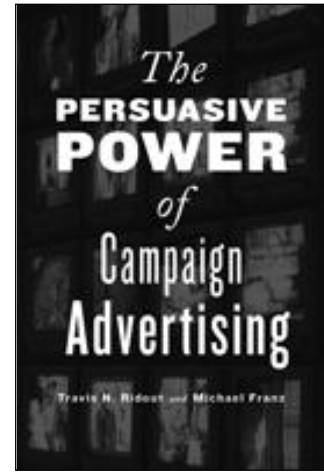
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With the 2012 U.S. presidential election just behind us—and a price tag estimated at around \$6 billion—we witnessed the most expensive election season in American history (Gara, 2012). The presidential and midterm elections together amounted to \$1 billion in advertising spending; and in the 2012 presidential race alone, the number of 1 million aired ads was surpassed. Obama and Romney spent \$710 million in just 12 battleground states like Florida and Ohio (*The Washington Post*, 2012). Compared to what it was in the 2000 presidential campaign (\$18 per voter), spending per voter has more than doubled to an estimated \$42 this year (Gara, 2012).

There seems to be no doubt for those responsible that television advertisements are an important instrument to positively affect a citizen's decision at the ballot box. In *The Persuasive Power of Campaign Advertising*, Ridout and Franz try to shed some light on this process, and to empirically analyze both whether political ads on television matter and how they affect voters' attitudes toward specific candidates and their political decisions.

Ridout and Franz pursue the goal—as they put it—“to offer the most comprehensive examination to date of the persuasive power of televised campaign ads” (p. 4). To achieve this goal, they combine ad-tracking data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project¹ (these data include the date, sponsor, and location/media market of each ad that aired in the largest U.S. media markets) with nationally representative public opinion surveys and investigate the presidential races in 2000 and 2004, as well as 60 Senate races from those two election cycles. In addition to overall effects of political advertising on voters' attitudes and voting behavior on election day, they examine if political advertising is moderated by the following three factors: “ad characteristics” (e.g., promotional versus attack ads), “the campaign context in which they air” (open seats and competitive races with an incumbent running), and “the receiver of the ad message” (e.g., partisan versus independent viewers; p. 5). By combining and analyzing these data, they find that “advertising is broadly effective—far more broadly than theory might suggest” (p. 77).

Ridout and Franz's book reports interesting and comprehensive empirical findings, and these help to shed light on the effectiveness of political advertising on television. The book has 152 pages, comprises



¹ Data are available online at <http://wiscadproject.wisc.edu>

eight chapters (empirical data are presented in Chapters 4–7), and is addressed to scholars in communication research and political communication, as well as to election campaigners and interested parties in political communication/advertising.

As the authors appropriately point out, their methodological approach is the book's primary contribution (p. 4). In contrast to experimental study designs (with high internal and rather low external validity) that, for instance, analyze the effects of certain ads in a campaign, the authors' extensive approach (including different elections) provides valuable information on ad effects with a high degree of external validity. However, potential problems that may result from deriving causal relations (advertising effects) with the help of the correlative study design are only vaguely considered. Focusing on methodological aspects, Ridout and Franz's discussion of the detected effects can be seen as the major shortcoming of the book. This is especially true of the different potential explanations that are given with recourse to both political and commercial advertising theory, which are not particularly thorough and inexact, respectively.

The authors start with an introduction on the "Role of Campaign Advertising" and "The Problem of Persuasion" (Chapters 1–2), followed by a methodological description of the research design and the data used (Chapter 3).

In Chapter 4, the first empirical findings are presented. Analyzing different campaigns (the presidential general elections from 2000 and 2004, the presidential primaries from 2000, and the Senate general elections from 2000 and 2004), Ridout and Franz are able to demonstrate that political advertising on television "is broadly effective" (p. 77) and "can influence voting choice and evaluations of candidates" (p. 71). With the help of a simulation, they use county-level data (multi-election data collected in 2000, 2004, and 2008) to illustrate how a different ad environment can contribute to an election outcome. Taking the 2000 general presidential election as an example, they demonstrate that a 10% increase in pro-Gore ads would have resulted in almost 135,000 more votes nationwide—leading to different Electoral College outcomes in several states, including Florida: "Gore would have won Florida and the White House had he increased his ad buys by 10% in the six major Florida markets" (p. 75).

In Chapter 5, the authors further analyze the extent to which negativity and emotional appeals (fear, anger, enthusiasm) in ads matter. What they find are mixed and inconsistent effects: For example, negative ads were effective for Bush in 2004, but they had no effect on either of the presidential candidates in 2000. Overall, they find "support for the intended effects model" and only "three significant instances of backlash" (p. 99).

The authors then focus in Chapter 6 on how the receiver's characteristics matter. They analyze whether a recipient's specific level of political information or partisanship will moderate political advertising effects. They only find limited effects for an influence of partisanship, and they conclude "that partisans were often influenced by advertising—even advertising from the opposite party" (p. 119). Furthermore, they find that ad effects are widespread across levels of political knowledge, and that those with lower levels of political information are more likely to be affected.

In Chapter 7, the authors analyze both how political ads may be amplified through news media coverage, and how ads further circulate through the Internet. In this context, they discuss the trend and potential effects of ads being covered in the news media. They suppose that candidates produce certain ads (with high amounts of conflict and controversy) merely for the purpose of getting those ads to be reported on by the media. In so doing, the candidates receive free media attention for the campaign. For example, "the most discussed Obama and McCain ads in the media were the ads that candidates aired the least often and spent the least money on" (p. 131).

Hence, the central message of the book is that political TV ads are broadly effective. Furthermore, the authors argue that this will be the case for the years to come: "Televised political advertising in the traditional sense is as relevant today as a vote-getting tool as it was before campaigns took to the web, and this is likely to remain true for a number of future election cycles" (p. 142). Overall, the authors mostly fall short in explaining the detected effects and the possible implications of their findings. In different parts of the book, data is presented without any explanatory connection to theory. For example, they show that high-information respondents (those with a higher score on a political knowledge scale) were influenced by ads in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, but not in those years' Senate races. Furthermore, they report that ads had an effect on low-information respondents in some of their calculated models (e.g., Republican Senate models in 2000, Kerry's favorability model in 2004), but showed no effects in others (p. 110), and that partisans were often (and against their original hypothesis) influenced by political ads from the opposite party (p. 119). The reason for this remains unclear—and besides the suggestion that effects are "widespread" (p. 121), no (profound) explanations are suggested.

One explanation they do give is an idea that is discussed in different parts of the book: Citizens seem to (increasingly) use political ads as information about candidates and their specific standpoints. In a globalized world with more and more complex issues, and in times of a general decrease in citizens' interest in and attention to political issues (the viewership for major presidential speeches, press conferences, and the State of the Union has dropped significantly (a 50% decrease) between 1980 and 2005 [Wattenberg, 2010], while time spent watching TV has continuously increased), political ads may be helpful for citizens to receive information about political candidates/standpoints/issues in an easy, uncomplex, and fast (30-second portions) way. "In many cases, they (ads) represent the voter's only exposure to the candidate. This is particularly true for political novices who may avoid news media or Internet blog coverage of campaigns" (p. 5).

In summary, and especially taking the aforementioned theoretical shortcomings into account, Ridout and Franz's book can be considered recommended reading for those interested in the effects of political advertising in the United States. Particularly, the methodological approach and the generated data help to better demonstrate the relevance of political advertising. Furthermore, the simulations calculated on the basis of the empirical data, and the (potential) resulting effects for different elections elucidate why candidates spend billions of dollars on TV ads—simply because political ads do work. At the end of this little book, the reader is inevitably forced to conclude that money (at least under specific circumstances) does help to buy elections.

References

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